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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000329

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM EU VE

SUBJECT: VENEZUELA: EU DIPLOMAT CONCERNED ABOUT RCTV AND
CHAVEZ' INCREASING AUTHORITARIANISM

REF: A. CARACAS 00053

1B. CARACAS 00092

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES FOR 1.4 (B) and (D)

Summary

11. (C) EU First Secretary Denis Daniilidis (protect) told Poloff February 7 that the EU Commission is increasingly concerned about President Chavez' push to implement his "socialist revolution." Daniilidis said the EU mission is organizing a trip to Brussels for Radio Caracas Television (RCTV) President Marcel Granier, which may lead the EU to lobby the BRV privately to refrain from closing RCTV. The EU mission is also "actively monitoring" Chavez' use of the decree powers granted by the National Assembly via the omnibus Enabling Act, and is assisting opposition political party and NGO rebuilding efforts. Lastly, Daniilidis mentioned that the EU electoral observation mission's final report on the 2006 presidential elections, scheduled for release in mid-February, will highlight Chavez' campaign violations in more detail. End Summary.

EU Gets Involved in RCTV

12. (C) EU First Secretary Denis Daniilidis, speaking in strict confidence, told Poloff February 7 that the EU Mission is organizing a trip for Radio Caracas Television (RCTV) President Marcel Granier to meet with EU officials, possibly including EU parliamentarians, in Brussels. President Chavez has a long-standing feud with Granier and RCTV, one of the key opposition media outlets, accusing them of continually supporting anti-government efforts including the April 2002 coup attempt. In late December 2006, Chavez announced he would not renew the station's broadcasting license, sparking widespread criticism and concern from OAS Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza, international press freedom organizations, the Catholic Church, and the opposition (Reftels).

¶3. (C) Daniilidis said EU members see two issues at stake: freedom of speech (argued by the UK) and rule of law (argued by most other members). Daniilidis thought they would get farther pushing the legal merits of RCTV's case, since the BRV hasn't followed its own procedures. The freedom of speech issue is harder, in his view, because the BRV has been unclear about what will happen to the frequency. Daniilidis thought an EU argument for free speech could be undermined, for example, if the BRV were to follow the model of one Dutch concession that allows several stations to share one frequency during the day. (Note: No one in the BRV has suggested this scenario, but rather has argued for using the frequency for public (i.e. Chavista) broadcasting.)

Concern about Democracy

¶4. (C) Daniilidis said the EU mission is "actively monitoring" how Chavez uses his newly-conferred decree powers, but will likely pursue quiet diplomacy, seeing little value in openly confronting Chavez for now. Daniilidis said he expected Chavez to concentrate even more power in his hands and to begin closing off what little access diplomats have to government officials. Some EU member embassies are just taking the wait-and-see approach, he confessed. Nevertheless, Daniilidis did not rule out a public EU response at some point. He also said he has spoken to parliamentarians from Chavez' Fifth Republic Movement (MVR), and ruling coalition partners Patria Para Todos (PPT) and Podemos who privately expressed concern about Chavez, "socialist" agenda. They also warned him the International Cooperation Law is coming back soon.

¶5. (C) As a result of their preoccupation with Chavez' "socialist" direction, the Commission is also trying to help opposition political parties and some NGOs rebuild. The EU recognizes it will be a long process, but the parties need

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help now to strengthen their ability to eventually counter Chavez. Daniilidis did not specify what types of EU assistance may be offered, but it presumably includes technical assistance, training, and possibly exchanges with EU member countries.

Final Election Observation Report

¶6. (SBU) Separately, Daniilidis indicated that members of the EU election observation mission (EOM) will return February 21 to present their final report on the December 2006 presidential election. Daniilidis claims this report will be stronger than the preliminary report because it contains more detail, which highlights Chavez, campaign abuses. The EOM will present the report to the National Electoral Council and other unnamed BRV authorities before holding a press conference, which he predicted may take place on Feb. 23. Daniilidis speculated that this would probably be the last Venezuelan election that the EU will monitor for some time. (Note: Daniilidis has previously told us that the EU, which monitored the 2005 legislative election, does not typically monitor consecutive elections in the same country. They made an exception in 2006 given the high level of political polarization.)

Comment

¶7. (C) As Chavez continues to accumulate power and dismantle Venezuela's democratic institutions, the few remaining pockets of domestic opposition--the press, Church, political parties, NGOs--will look for international support. Granier's visit to Europe provides an opportunity to bring

more visibility in EU capitals to Chavez' attempts to close down independent media and increasing disregard for the rule of law. While an effective international response may not be enough to stop an emboldened Chavez from exacting revenge on this long-time nemesis, it will increase the political cost of the move and can help undermine his international standing.

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